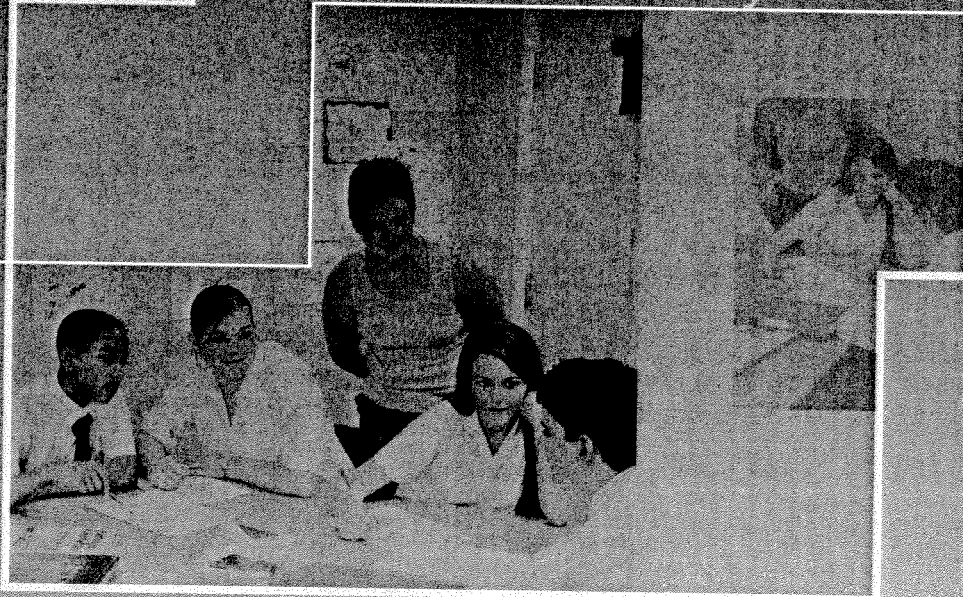


Formative Assessment

in the Secondary Classroom

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Introduction

“Formative assessment is the process used by teachers and children to recognise and respond to pupil learning, in order to enhance that learning during the activity or task.”

(Cowie and Bell, 1999)

Formative Assessment, or ‘Assessment for Learning’, as it has become known, has always existed, sometimes carried out automatically and instinctively by unknowing teachers. Today, it has a respected high profile in UK schools and continues to be developed and explored by educators across all subjects and phases. Rather than being just another government initiative, formative assessment is about teachers being action researchers, taking a few research principles and experimenting with ways of putting them into action. Teachers are continually redefining these strategies, which evolve and develop over time.

As formative assessment has gained such a high profile, in the UK especially, there are inevitable instances of it being misinterpreted. Formative assessment is often seen as using a variety of strategies to ascertain current knowledge and understanding in order to then set targets for improvement, as if the finding out and knowing what needs to be learned next is, in itself, formative. Although these actions are necessary, formative assessment happens *after* the finding out has taken place. It describes the complex process of furthering pupil learning during the learning process, enabling the targets to be met or the quality learning to happen.

In the early days of the National Curriculum, and still today, formative assessment was often defined, wrongly, as simply ongoing summative assessment. The following lists summarise the realities of summative and formative practices in secondary schools at this time.

Summative assessment (measuring attainment)

Current practice for summative assessment tends to consist of the following:

- statutory Key Stage 3 tests
- non-statutory 'optional' tests
- external exams
- commercially produced tests, if chosen by the school
- school and class tests created by teachers
- deciding Key Stage 3 Teacher Assessment levels
- deciding grades: for one piece of work, the end of a unit, a term or a year
- entrance exams for colleges or universities
- recall questions which establish current knowledge or understanding
- any assessment method which aims to establish whether learning has taken place or a target has been met
- any other data about student performance in the school.

Formative assessment (enabling achievement)

Practice drawn from the research base tends to consist of the following:

- clarifying learning objectives and success criteria at the planning stage, as a framework for formative assessment processes (*Chapter 1*);
- sharing learning objectives and success criteria with students, both long term and for individual lessons (*Chapter 2*);

- appropriate and effective questioning which develops the learning rather than attempts to measure it (*Chapter 3*);
- focusing oral and written feedback, whether from teacher or student, around the development of learning objectives and meeting of targets (*Chapter 5*);
- organising targets so that students' achievement is based on previous achievement as well as aiming for the next step (ipsative referencing) (*Chapter 5*);
- involving students in self- and peer evaluation (*Chapter 6*);
- raising students' self-efficacy and holding a belief that all students have the potential to learn and to achieve (*throughout the book*).

The current context for secondary schools

The National Curriculum, statutory testing and external tests and league tables present the same opportunities, pressures and problems for both primary and secondary schools. The secondary context is the focus of this book, so the following issues are acknowledged:

- The pressures of meeting departmental/school targets/performance management targets for external examinations (SATs/GCSE) has made many teachers wary of trying something different.
- Subject coverage still dominates and many teachers see formative assessment as something else to be fitted in.

This has been the case for some primary teachers, but the high profile of formative assessment has encouraged teachers to look at what it really means. Doing formative assessment is about changing the way in which a lesson is constructed and managed, the culture and ethos of the classroom and the quality of questioning and feedback. Most of all, it is about the involvement of students in the learning process, beyond anything traditional teaching has previously allowed. The proven effect of teaching in this way is that students do BETTER at tests than before and become life-long independent learners.

Priorities

In order for formative assessment to be embedded in practice, it is vital that teachers have *students' learning* as their priority: not their teaching or the opinions of outside parties. This is easy to say, but less easy to implement. This book takes account of the realities of the classroom and external pressures, within the context of striving for a whole-school rationale. Ways of facilitating and nurturing students' learning and their desire to learn must override all other aims. Teaching is, of course, a key instrument, and throughout the book strategies are shared and analysed so that the best of practice can 'travel'.

Formative assessment is a powerful vehicle for focusing on effective learning. However, it is not a quick fix: it takes time, thought and discussion to become embedded. It also involves, in many cases, a gradual power shift, through modelling and training, enabling students to gradually take more and more control over their learning and the decisions they make to enhance that learning.

Askew and Lodge's (2000) framework for feedback encapsulates the entire learning journey, from teachers' control to student power.

Learning style	View of feedback
Instruction (<i>direct teaching</i>)	The Gift
Construction (<i>dialogue between teacher and student</i>)	Ping-pong
Co-construction (<i>free-flow dialogue between teachers and students separately and together</i>)	Loops

(Askew and Lodge, 2000)

We are aiming for 'loops', but we may need to include more 'gifts' and 'ping-pong' at the beginning of the continuum of control in order to reach that point.

The same principles and continuum apply when working with adults in their professional development. For some teachers,

introducing formative assessment will require a re-evaluation of how they teach and how they perceive that students learn. Formative assessment only works when teachers come to own it for themselves – when they can talk to others about the way it works in their classroom, and when they become part of the huge number of teachers continually discovering and understanding better ways of helping students not only to learn but to love learning.